

The Great Barents Awakening

Abstract Norway's foreign policy in the European Arctic during the 1990s was mainly about bringing Russia into committing collaborative networks. Bilateral cooperative arenas were developed and expanded in areas such as environmental protection, nuclear safety, and fisheries management. The hallmark of the new times was the Barents Euro-Arctic Region, which on Norwegian initiative formalized cooperation in a number of functional fields between Russia and the Nordic countries. The aim of the initiative was to counter military tension, reduce the threat to the environment, and narrow the gap in living standards between people in the Nordic countries and Russia. This chapter describes how Norwegian authorities went about this region-building project, assuming that regions can be “talked and written into existence”.

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Barents region

Around the mid-1990s, I suddenly found myself attending conferences on the Barents Region. I had just graduated in political science and started in a new job as a researcher, but I already had a few years as a Russian interpreter to my name. Awestruck, I found a place in the hall where everybody on two legs in the European Arctic seemed to be in attendance: ministry officials, county politicians, journalists, and social scientists. Coincidentally, I had begun studying Russian just at the

moment the Soviet Union was opening up to the outside world, and I passed my master's degree the same year as the multilateral Barents cooperation project came into being, in 1993. I'd been hoping to be part of the pioneering work about to unfold in the High North.

I soon got to know the setting and dramaturgy of these conferences: the slightly hectic atmosphere, the excited participants, the palpable frisson. Ministry officials had travelled North from Oslo to unveil the Barents Region as the country's new major foreign policy commitment. Regional politicians ostentatiously welcomed their Russian neighbours back into the northern fold—and shed an occasional tear reminiscing about their forefathers' struggle to survive and the songs of their foremothers. It was the political scientists and geographers that drew the diagrams and did the explanations: about transboundary cooperation, infrastructure, and integration. It was the local business community that made off with the main prize: a huge, hungry Russian market. There were photographer-journalists who shot pictures and made notes, who sent reports to their newsrooms about the giant strides being taken in the North. The Rica Arctic Hotel in Kirkenes was enjoying a record season. And in the front row sat the Russians, mute and besuited.

Seventy years of Soviet rule and closed borders in the North were now, the message went, a historical parenthesis. United again, Russians and Scandinavians could resurrect the close and trusting ties that had existed before the 1917 Russian Revolution, when it didn't matter if you were Norwegian, Russian, Sámi, or Finn—you were a Northerner and a neighbour, and that was that. Borders would now be opened again and Norwegian and Russian citizens of the North would rediscover how similar they really were, formed down the centuries by barren landscapes, a harsh northern climate and the unavoidable traumas of living in the periphery. Political scientists spoke enthusiastically about transnational collaboration in border regions as the new trend in Europe, about synergies and centrifugal forces. Geographers were particularly energetic, smiling broadly as they unfurled charts with pyramids and telling the audience that with sufficient infrastructure at the bottom of the pyramid, cross-border commerce and human relations would follow, just as superstructure follows base. Language training and logistics would remove whatever might be left of Soviet sand in the machinery of collaboration.

And I thought: What about the Russian factor?

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The northern regions had obviously been a serious concern in Norwegian foreign policy long before the Barents cooperation was conceived. It was a question of national security after all, and it was in the North everything was happening. Norway and its neighbour, the Soviet Union, were on opposite sides of the Cold War barrier between NATO and the Warsaw Pact; the Kola Peninsula was generally held to be the world's most militarized zone. Apart from this, the Barents Sea had seen both conflict and friendship between the Soviet bear and its Norwegian neighbour. The maritime boundary and Svalbard zone: on these questions, the parties still stood some distance apart. That said, the Joint Norwegian–Russian Fisheries Commission, established in 1976, was a rare example of a formalized East–West collaborative body in the Arctic during the Cold War.

When the Berlin Wall fell in the autumn of 1989, the Norwegian–Soviet border was already changing from an impenetrable physical barricade to bustling conduit of international contact. In 1985, the relatively young and very dynamic Mikhail Gorbachev had taken the helm of the Soviet Communist Party and two years later had given his famous “Murmansk speech” in which he spoke of the importance of protecting the natural environment and normalizing the highly militarized North. People in the Nordic countries were soon racing to come up with the smartest idea to include Russia in binding conventions with the outside world, that is, the Western hemisphere, and reap whatever economic benefits the East produced, but above all prevent the bankrupt world power from spiralling into an economic abyss or into fits of madness. The Finns were thinking about an expanded Calotte region, an extension eastwards of the established North Calotte cooperation, where Russia's Nordic neighbours had been coming for decades to make merry, sing, and joust. The Norwegians beat Helsinki to it, and by April 1992, Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg was ready to throw his trump card onto the table. Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was on board—and the baby would be named the *Barents Region*.

The Euro-Arctic Barents Region was created with due pomp and circumstance in the Norwegian border town of Kirkenes in January 1993; the political glitterati from East and West, North and South sparkled in attendance: foreign ministers from of a large handful of northern

European countries, Messrs Kozyrev and Stoltenberg of course, and representation from most of the great powers of the day. The name had not been chosen without careful consideration. “Barents” alluded obviously to the adjacent marine areas while also clearly indicating where the idea had originated. Of the four potential parties to the expanded North Calotte—all of which were now becoming Barents countries—only Norway and Russia had borders on the Barents Sea. But “Euro”, where had that come from? While the documentation is patchy, “everyone knows” it was the brainchild of the Norwegian Labour Party—championed not least by arch EU supporter Stoltenberg in a bid to give everything smacking of “Euro” a positive spin in the run-up to Norway’s second EU referendum. The pig-headed Northerner would get something to think about, or at least be challenged at a subconscious level. Isn’t “Euro” ultimately a good thing, something that not only creates associations with Belgium and pizza countries (a steward on a coastguard vessel I served on refused to serve “EU food”, that is pasta and pizza, during the heated EU referendum campaign in 1994), but to *détente*, northern lights and transboundary happiness—a bit like dancing around the Berlin Wall?

The aim of the multilateral Barents project, as it was seen in 1993, was to counter military tension, reduce the threat to the environment, and narrow the gap in living standards between people in the Nordic countries and Russia. Three keywords tended to be highlighted as general objectives in the time that followed: normalization, demilitarization, and regionalization. As we saw in Chap. 1, the border between East and West in the North would be like the border between the Nordic countries and their other European neighbours (“normalization”). Military tensions would be reduced (“demilitarization”). And the Barents partnership would be seen in the light of a broader political process in Europe where regions were attempting to increase their influence vis-à-vis central authorities (“regionalization”), not least transnational regions where governments and commerce in different countries had created transboundary clusters.

What was more, the Barents Region would become an identity region—a region whose population had a distinct sense of “us”, as opposed to “them”, people outside the region. It would be a functional region, a region characterized by extensive trade and other cross-border business. In the effort to turn the Barents Region into an identity region, advocates frequently highlighted what was known as the Pomor

trade between Northern Norway and areas around Arkhangelsk before the 1917 Russian Revolution. In essence, the Pomor trade involved the exchange of Russian flour for Norwegian fish while also enabling a measure of East–West socializing, eventually giving rise to a form of pidgin Russo-Norwegian—*moya po tvoya*: me and you.¹ The history of the Pomors was supposed to show that the free movement of goods and comradely cross-border intercourse constituted the natural state of the High North. Historic Kola Norwegians were used for all they were worth as yet more proof that we were all in the same Barents boat. The descendants of the pre-Revolutionary Norwegian colony on the Rybachy Peninsula close to the Norwegian border—a dozen Norwegian families settled there in the late 1800s—would now have an opportunity to return home. The government quickly adopted a repatriation programme: a rare occurrence in Norwegian immigration policy. The Ministry of Local Government was hardly overjoyed, but foreign policy eclipsed all other concerns. A region would be built and the Russian threat tamed.

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Institutionally, the multilateral Barents project has both a national and a regional anchoring. At the national level, the Euro-Arctic Barents Council is the highest body, the playground of governments at which foreign ministers—and often other ministers—from the entire Nordic realm get together along with representatives of the European Commission as well. A few handfuls of other respectable nations are permitted to observe proceedings, from Poland in the East and Italy in the South to Canada and the USA in the West. But it is the regions that occupy centre stage: counties in Northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, north-west Russian provinces, republics, and autonomous regions. We are talking about the counties of Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark in Norway, Västerbotten and Norrbotten in Sweden, Lapland in Finland, etc., along with Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and Karelia with adjacent gems on the Eastern side of the old Iron Curtain: originally seven, currently thirteen. The Barents Regional Council is their stamping ground—a small handful of indigenous peoples are also included: Sámi, Nenets, and Vepsians. While the Barents Council lays down the general parameters at the national level, the regional council is more of a hands-on body. It initiates and executes periodical and sectoral Barents programmes in close consultation with a preparatory regional committee. Individual

countries have adopted their own Barents secretariats to handle project cooperation in the region. Norway, first out in the rotating presidency, had wanted the secretariat in Kirkenes to be recognized as a permanent hub of the transnational partnership, but the other countries were quick to create similar organizations when they were in the driving seat, albeit on a smaller scale and with closer ties to regional authorities. In 2007, however, an international coordinating secretariat was established in Kirkenes, alongside the Norwegian national secretariat.

The mandate of the regional partnership included economic, trade, science and technology, tourism, environment, infrastructure, education and cultural exchange issues, and steps to improve the situation of indigenous people in the area. As far as I could see from my new research desk in the Northern Norwegian capital of Tromsø in the mid-1990s, the first Barents programme was a smorgasbord of desired projects into which the four member states could pour money at will; the glossy brochure was comprehensive and detailed at least. We peddled our expertise in humble researcher mode while the Barents Secretariat, which held the Norwegian purse strings, indicated what it wanted us to do. I ended up as a hired consultant for the regional council's cultural committee; its approach was pragmatic and professional. From the higher echelons, a decree had been sent forth, however, to irrigate every Barents project with a smattering of environmentalism, whether it was a new road or potato, a sculpture, winter games, or violins. Give environmental awareness the boogie-woogie treatment. "Culture as a creator of identity" was the title of my report, or something like it—in good region-building spirit.

Buzz words were doing the rounds: Barents cafés, Pomor pubs, Gorbie discos. As a young coastguard officer in the early 1990s, I visited them all. I was like a Russian under Perestroika, intoxicated by the Zeitgeist. On my first Soviet trip on the Trans-Siberian Railway in the summer of 1988, I experienced for the only time in my thirty-year-long career some degree of optimism among Russians about the future of their country. I was no wet blanket either with regard to Gorbie or my scientific aspirations. The future was here and now, snow white and bright: Northwards, Eastwards!

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In discourse terms, Barents euphoria consisted of several layers. The first and most immediate was the euphoria generated by the idea of the

liberated Soviet citizen. We are talking about the success of the anti-communist liberation struggle in Europe: from the Velvet Revolution in Prague to Ceausescu's demise in the Romanian countryside. This was the people's revolt against cynical power brokers, celebrated with uninhibited dancing in the street and renewed faith in humanity. It was soon the turn of the Soviet republics: freedom swept from the Baltics in the north-west to Central Asia in the south-east. Even the Russians could now rid themselves of the fog of communism and finally gain access to all that the modern world had to offer. And in the Barents Region, the lost sheep, Russia, could be shepherded back into the northern fold. There were Sámi and Pomor, Kola Nordics and Karelians—all Northerners as good as any. Just as the early Marxist-Leninists believed the nationalities of the Russian Empire would fuse into a completely new type of citizen, Soviet man, the Barents citizen would rise again in the boundless North, albeit in a far more playful version than the Soviet coal and steel variant. The new Barents citizen would have several hats to put on: grizzled Nenets at night, sophisticated cosmopolitan in daytime—local and global in one.

This surge of Barentian euphoria was used instrumentally by both national and regional actors—it was a textbook example of region building. Learning about theories of statehood and nation building belongs to first-year reading in political science. It's one thing to establish a formal state, another to build a nation, creating a sense in the population that they and no one else belong together. Usually, the state's elite unearths whatever's available of historical events and cultural traits to help fashion a notion of the “we” that belongs together within the state's borders, as opposed to the “them”, who exist on the other side. As the American social anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) put it, nations are *imagined communities*. The region builder is the little brother of the nation builder; the mechanisms are the same. Regions are, in the words of Iver Neumann (1994, p. 59)—also he a social anthropologist and political scientist—“talked and written into existence”. Regions aren't some predetermined territory “just lying there” like naturally demarcated units based on physical contours, cultural commonalities, or power politics. Regions are what we make of them, and they are created in text and speech. It will always be possible to find supporting arguments that one or another geographical area constitutes a natural unit. It's often easiest to retrieve some incident from history, blow off the dust, and give it a symbolic function. As we saw, the Pomor trade filled this role in the Barents Region project, the Kola Norwegians likewise.

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spearheaded this region-building exercise, but social scientists were brought onto the team from the first moment. On the basis of the Polar and Russia programmes at the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, a dozen scientists were engaged in 1992/1993 to write on foreign policy visions and cross-border commercial prospects in the North. Similar research groups were soon created in Sweden and Finland, and the networks also added participants from the Russian side. A particularly important role would be given the geographers and their models of regional integration. Human geography is a far more common subject in neighbouring countries than it is in Norway, and it did more to stoke the sense of optimism than our own rather staid Russian studies. Reports and articles were written predicting how the development of infrastructure would lead to the integration of all kinds of other fields: cultural, social, and economic.² Although it was not part of the geographers' intention to issue predictions (although one might sometimes suspect that), their models made it into non-academic discourses on developments in the North and were seen as having a more empirically predictive message in political and business circles. People rallied enthusiastically behind plans to expand transportation and logistics in the North—new roads, railways, and airports. It was all needed, everyone seemed to agree, to clear away the last remnants of the Berlin Wall in North.

Government officials and business people in Northern Norway were eager to join the dance. Many would deny that the Barents Region was primarily a national initiative; after all, there was already a good deal of regional-level cooperation between Norway and Russia before Thorvald Stoltenberg launched his idea. But the initiative of the political elite in Norway to construct an official region with the participation of the national government was now a fact, so one might as well jump on the bandwagon. Visionary politicians, entrepreneurial traders, and reunification romantics in the South and North, together with geographers who were not exactly spoilt by such interest in their models, had set the agenda. With roads and industrial parks would the region be built.

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In parallel with the nascent reunification discourse, another picture began to take shape of the Russians, a picture that became in the 1990s the dominant representation of North-Western Russia in the mind of the Norwegian public. I'm referring to the great misery discourse. When

Norwegian journalists gained access in the late 1980s to the previously relatively inaccessible Kola Peninsula, descriptions of the area defined a new standard in disaster dramatics. First came the images of the blackened tree stumps followed by stories of nuclear radiation hell. The causes were the contaminating nickel works at Pechenga near the Norwegian border and radioactive waste scattered across the Kola Peninsula. On the Norwegian side, scorched vegetation had been recorded as early as the mid-1970s. This was caused by short-lived, intense exposure to sulphur dioxide. In 1969, the Pechenga smelter had started importing ore from Norilsk in Siberia, which had a significantly higher sulphur content than the local ore. People in Sør-Varanger in Finnmark launched the campaign “Stop the death clouds from the Soviet Union” in the late 1980s, and modernization of the nickel plant headed the list of priorities when the Joint Norwegian–Soviet environmental commission was set up in 1988. Two years later, the Norwegian government allocated NOK 300 million to the renovation of the nickel plant (which incidentally never happened).

Soon, however, another and even more frightening threat emerged. Towards the end of 1990, rumours began to circulate about the dumping of radioactive waste in the Barents and Kara seas.³ The rumours were later confirmed by a commission of inquiry appointed by the Russian parliament. Storage depots for radioactive waste in North-Western Russia were full, and the Russians lacked the capacity to recycle the waste or send it out of the region. In addition to waste and spent nuclear fuel from the Northern Fleet’s operational submarines and the nuclear-powered icebreaker fleet were the nuclear reactors and waste from submarines decommissioned in compliance with the disarmament agreements, Russia had recently signed with the USA and others. On top of this, the 1986 Chernobyl disaster caused concerns as to whether other nuclear power stations in Eastern bloc countries were unsafe—there was one such plant in the town of Polyarnye Zori in the southern part of the Kola Peninsula. These safety concerns caused the Norwegian government to commission in 1995—at the behest of Parliament—an action plan on nuclear issues in areas adjacent to Norway in the North. The Nuclear Action Plan is still the most expensive programme of Norway’s High North policy and remains operational today.

The environmental disaster image is the cornerstone of the great misery discourse. “Sør-Varanger [the Norwegian municipality bordering Russia] will be a desert in 20 years!” wrote Friends of the Earth Norway

in 1990.⁴ “Chernobyl in our food basket”, the environmental NGO Bellona responded a few years later.⁵ It was all about moonscapes and ticking bombs. Or the children’s rhyme: “All the children were healthy except Ola, he’d been to Kola”.

Around the mid-1990s, stories of human suffering began to take over; the blackened stumps made room for street children, prostitutes, and tuberculosis. For a couple of kroner a day, you can give a small child in Murmansk a bowl of soup, said Thorvald Stoltenberg in a TV commercial for the Red Cross. Hunger compels Russia’s proud daughters into prostitution, wrote the media. There wasn’t much else a young girl from Murmansk could do, obviously. (For the record: there was.)

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The misery discourse gave the Norwegians the opportunity to play the role of Good Samaritan; Russia in 1992 welcomed anyone who felt they had something to contribute. Among the Western countries queuing up at the border with bread and circuses was also Norway. The circus was organized mainly by the Americans, with everything from patronizing lectures on democracy to glitzy shows to encourage the adoption of the market economy in the workplace. Norway was one of the countries delivering large quantities of “bread”, albeit laced with a small dose of circus. “Across the country, several NGOs are busily collecting food, clothing, medicines and medical supplies etc. for small and large places in Eastern Europe”, said the government’s white paper heralding the creation of an action programme for Central and Eastern Europe.⁶ Norwegian aid shipments to Murmansk peaked in the wake of the 1998 “August crisis”, when the rouble lost much of its value. Humanitarian aid—the *gumanitarka* in colloquial Russian—was already a known phenomenon in the area, and not a particularly popular one among large sections of the local population. It was seen, rightly, as a manifestation of the rich neighbour in the West believing Russians were poorer than was actually the case. Murmansk Governor Yuri Yevdokimov spoke in two tongues. While petitioning for humanitarian assistance from Norway—he was on travel in the neighbouring country when the crisis erupted—back home he complained publically about the rags Norway was throwing at the Russians: “There is no tragedy, there is no disaster, in our region. There is no reason to expect 50,000 refugees on Norwegian soil. We can get by without their humanitarian help”.⁷ But what were conditions really like? Most people had lost their savings, and the value of salaries

had shrunk dramatically—dramatic enough, but less of an anomaly in Russia than in its Nordic neighbours. People still had enough money for food, if not quite for the latest mobile phone, to put it like that.

Another manifestation of the Norwegian desire to play the Good Samaritan card was the stubborn urge to “train” the Russians to do things our way. Nobody really questioned whether the Russians wanted or needed to be trained, nor the soundness of the ultimate goal: a society à la our own. The purpose of the Norwegian aid—sorry, partnership—was to enable and encourage “a fundamental restructuring” of Russian politics and society, no less.⁸ For example, we would help the Russians build “transport and telecommunication systems”, “an efficient customs administration”, “an open and independent press structure”, “an agricultural produce trading system”. We would help “train Russian fishermen” and transfer some of our own “environmental expertise to Russia”.⁹ The general feeling in Norway was: “Look at us, we’re training the Russians!” The Cold War was over and won, and it was a pleasure to be able to help a misguided Russia rise from the ashes, indeed to bring it to the threshold of a new era. At the first joint seminar for Norwegian and Russian fisheries inspectors, in 1993, attended by Defence Minister Jørgen Kosmo and Fisheries Minister Jan Henry T. Olsen to underline the importance of the Norwegian initiative (as well as by myself), journalists insisted on having a photograph of a Norwegian inspector controlling mesh sizes with a Russian inspector at his side, looking on. The interpretation: “Just look, [Norwegian] Ola is teaching [Russian] Ivan how to measure a mesh size!” The reports that followed bore headings like “Back to school for Russians” and “Russians visiting Norway to learn”.¹⁰ Ivan, it hardly needs to be said, was perfectly competent at measuring mesh sizes before Ola entered the frame.

The great misery discourse is the negative twin of the Barents euphoria discourse, two sides of the same coin. It’s black and it’s scary, but it’s exciting and it’s full speed ahead. We speak in big words and act with big money. The High North is still where the action is.

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I don’t like saying “what did I say?”, but I did see it coming. “Oddrun’s fiasco” glared out at me from the newspaper one day towards the end of the 1990s, with reference to the head of the Barents Secretariat (and famous former minister from the Labour Party), Oddrun Pettersen.¹¹ There were limits to how long the media would find it interesting to

write about Ola and Ivan finally working together. It's like the celebrity gossip magazines: If you invite them to the wedding, they'll come for the divorce.

In the Norwegian foreign policy salons, a rumour had been going the rounds for several years: the ministry had lost interest as early as 1994 and the EU referendum. Euro-Arctic splendour had been the government's gift to the North, but as everyone knows, there's no free lunch, etc. Northerners were invited to the Euro party; they accepted the Barents scheme but said no to the rest. *At least we tried*, but that was that. The Barents locomotive could not be stopped—it was impossible in view of both domestic regional and foreign policies—but instead of ministerial enthusiasm, it was more a case of cruising ahead on autopilot from now on.

It didn't take long before stories of scandals hit the news. The large industrial projects were the icing on the cake of the Barents programme in the early years. People spoke warmly about the environment and went in for expansive cultural exchange programmes. However, they could hardly conceal that this was a mere garnish for the main course, the stuff that would create jobs, generate hard cash, and make coastal communities viable. Given the prevailing sense of optimism, there was no reason to doubt that success was imminent. The first major setback occurred a few years after the coming of the Barents Region. A jewel in the crown of the partnership, whose purpose was to convince the world that "it can be done", had until then been the Norwegian–Russian timber plant Rossnor in Arkhangelsk oblast (county).¹² Despite doing a brisk trade, in the spring of 1995, the Norwegian partners were shown the door and their equity lost. And despite winning their case in the Russian courts, the ruling was never enforced. The Norwegian partners were threatened with death and saw no alternative but to flee the country. For people in the know, these actions were nothing new. There had been several incidents in the fishing industry where Western investors had been thrown out as soon as the company had money to spare. But little was said about them. They were seen as anomalies or start-up difficulties in the business partnership. Rossnor, though, was the watershed event.

In the years that followed, similar stories would surface from time to time. One flagship after another sank to the bottom. The Pomor bakery in Nikel—the Russian border town—and Murmansk soon became the most prestigious business project; by 2000, it had closed down too. From the Norwegian standpoint, trickery and deception were obviously

involved. Close to a million kroner were lost when the Russian authorities without a moment's notice, according to the owners, confiscated equipment from the bakery. In 2004, the herring factory Gigante Murmansk followed. It had been marketed as a new and much-needed success. After the Norwegians had invested tens of millions—largely public funds—the Russians appropriated the majority shareholding in an unexpected move the Norwegian partners could do little to prevent. Within the Nuclear Action Plan's project portfolio, the situation was proving even uglier. As the largest foreign investor, Norway had funded the construction of a liquid radioactive waste treatment plant in Murmansk. With every fresh update, we were informed the facility was almost operational. In the end, the project was tucked away in the drawer for unsuccessful projects. I had been involved in evaluating the performance of the Nuclear Action Plan in 2000. In our interviews with Russians, the situation at the treatment plant—which just before had again declared its imminent start-up—was typically described as a “too gilt-edged”. It would have been completed on time “if it had not been for the generous funding from abroad”. Norwegian media entered the fray, and the Foreign Ministry didn't mince its words. “Norwegian nuclear crisis in Murmansk”, wrote the largest Norwegian newspaper, *Aftenposten*, in 2001.¹³ “Nuclear Plan not a great success”, admitted the State Secretary of the Foreign Ministry a few days later.¹⁴

Disappointment over the failed business ventures and nuclear projects spreads gradually to the Barents initiative itself. Although it was still possible to encounter the old joy and optimism from the early days in laudatory speeches, official Norwegian rhetoric tended to note in passing nowadays that the project had not progressed as smoothly as initially anticipated. In a 1999 publication on the Barents Region from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we can read: “Early expectations of good commercial and investment outcomes were in hindsight too optimistic”.¹⁵ Likewise, the Ministry's Russian strategy from 2000 says: “There is little doubt that we in 1993 and subsequent years had unrealistic hopes concerning economic cooperation in the Barents Region”.¹⁶ The media described the situation in less equivocal terms. A typical example is a headline in *Aftenposten* in 2000: “Foreign Ministry spent 1.1 billion in Russia: Frittered away on pointless folly”.¹⁷ Things take longer than we envisaged at first, the State Secretary at the Ministry conceded in the report, but “the Ministry has by no means abandoned its commitment to the Barents Region. What next year's priorities will be, we do not know yet”.¹⁸

The Barents cooperation has done a great deal of good, and it has not been particularly expensive compared to other major initiatives in the High North. Two unconditional winners are the people-to-people cooperation project and the Barents Health Programme. And borders at least in one respect are gone—a generation of young Barents–Northerners has grown up enjoying cross-border education opportunities. The local border traffic permit was introduced, and visa rules were relaxed. There are plenty of examples of small-scale business partnerships. But by the turn of the millennium, the voice of the ministry had lost much of its conviction: “We do not know entirely what next year’s focus will be, but we have not given up”. As we shall see later in the book, it would take years for a new commitment to emerge. (But when it did, it was welcomed with fanfares and fireworks.)

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Just a few months after my wide-eyed entry into the research arena, I was given a challenge of my own: to give a talk at a high-level Barents gathering at the Hotel Rica Arctic in Kirkenes. I had not been asked simply because of my expertise—which at the time was not widely known, and perhaps not completely honed—but the Northern Norwegian institution I worked for needed to be represented. One day the manager came into my office and said he had asked everyone thinkable among my senior colleagues if they could go, but none could. “So that leaves me with you, Geir”, he said. After receiving a personal invitation in the mail from Foreign Minister Bjørn Tore Godal—something my boss thought was a real treat—ministry officials proceeded to sample possible subjects for my talk. “Possibilities and limitations in Norwegian–Russian relations” would be fine, they agreed in some hurry. Others, I thought, were taking good care of the possibilities, but not wanting to appear unprepared, I did some research on heavy transport, timber exports, and tourism potentials. All the same, the main subject of my talk was the *challenges* facing cooperation, not least from a “cultural” point of view. I didn’t want to sound like a sour puss either, but I knew first hand that Norwegians and Russians in many situations bring very different frames of reference to the table. And I sincerely believed that *knowledge* of these “cultural differences” could only be of the good. The differences were not only the result of 70 years of communism in the Russian Empire; members of the “Barents fraternity” had for centuries lived in different cultural spheres, with the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the West, Mongols and Ivan

the Terrible in the East. Even the Pomor tradesmen thought their trade partners were exotic and alien, pidgin Russo-Norwegian notwithstanding. And Murmansk, the centre of the new Norwegian courtship, was not even thought of before that pre-Revolutionary trade had already ceased to exist. The Arctic's capital was built from scratch, starting at the end of World War I. Inhabitants of the Kola Peninsula are Southerners, for heaven's sake: first- second- or at least third-generation immigrants from *all over the place* in the former Soviet Union. Clearly, language training and infrastructure were not enough. Get hold of an interpreter and build a road, so we can get things moving somehow. Ivan is a likeable guy, and we've toasted our respective health in Russian vodka and Norwegian aquavit. As if Northernness alone gave an intuitive understanding of how the others thought.

Shortly before I mounted the podium, a flustered lady from the Foreign Office made a beeline towards me through the rows of seats in the Kirkenes cinema: "It's important you focus mainly on the opportunities, right? Not barriers and hindrances! Commerce and trade and such-like. You with me?"

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Ten years later, I stood on the same podium in Kirkenes, this time to launch my first book on Norwegian High North policy, *Barentsbrytninger* ("Barents Refractions").¹⁹ The book was written with a foot lightly touching the accelerator and without adding very much between the lines in my account of the Great Barents Awakening—it was a bit frantic at times (both the Awakening and the book). In particular, I focused on the Norwegian lack of understanding of Russian reality, from political system to public discourse in the new old Russia. In the audience were many enthusiastic Barents Region builders from the old, pioneering days, and I had the same lump in my throat as I had felt early in my career, when one wasn't supposed to talk about how long the road actually might turn out to be. Was the time ripe now? Would the founding fathers of the Region feel set upon? Would they feel insulted (I know that look on their faces) and want to get back at me? "*We're* the people who live up here in the North; *we're* the ones who know how the Russians think, and we simply do not recognize ourselves in your account," a well-rehearsed chorus indeed.

I talked about Norwegian euphoria and Russian sense of grievance, Norwegian terms and the Russian factor. Just as I was thanking

the audience for their attention, one of the Russians in suits in the front row stood up, clapped his hands, and turned to the rest of the audience: “Good story about Russia – exactly how it is!” No further questions from the audience.

NOTES

1. Literally: “mine in yours”, meaning “I speak your language”.
2. Traces of this discourse can be found in both the “official” Swedish (Dellenbrant and Olsson 1994) and Norwegian (Stokke and Tunander 1994) Barents Region-building books.
3. See, e.g., Stokke (1998) for an overview.
4. *Natur & Miljø Bulletin*, No. 13, 1990.
5. Hønneland (2005, p. 137).
6. *St.meld. nr. 74 (1992–1993) Om plan for samarbeid med Sentral- og Øst-Europa samt SUS-landene og i Barentsregionen* [“White Paper No. 74 (1992–1993) On a Plan for Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe as well as the CIS and in the Barents Region”]. Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993.
7. *Polyarnaya pravda*, 23 September 1998. The number 50,000 stems from an old Norwegian accident contingency plan for the nuclear power plant on the Kola Peninsula. It was erroneously presented in the Russian press as if Norway was expecting an influx of 50,000 Russian refugees fleeing the consequences of the economic crisis in Russia.
8. *St.meld. nr. 47 (1994–1995) Om handlingsprogrammet for Øst-Europa* [“White Paper No. 47 (1994–1995) On the Action Programme for Eastern Europe”]. Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995, Section 5.1.
9. *St.meld. nr. 74 (1992–1993) Om plan for samarbeid med Sentral- og Øst-Europa samt SUS-landene og i Barentsregionen* [“White Paper No. 74 (1992–1993) On a Plan for Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe as well as the CIS and in the Barents Region”]. Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1993. The quotes are from pp. 24, 25, 32, 34, and 40.
10. Because I didn’t save the various newspapers, the headings are from memory.
11. *VG*, 29 March 1997.
12. See Hønneland (2005, pp. 125–127).
13. *Aftenposten*, 10 January 2001.
14. *Aftenposten*, 24 January 2001.
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17. *Aftenposten*, 25 February 2000.
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19. See Hønneland (2005).

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